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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
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MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Implications of the Arab Summit

Overview

An influential Egyptian editor warned the Arabs on the eve of the Rabat summit against rigidly pursuing the kind of unanimity that "turns into complete paralysis." The Arabs ignored the warning. By prejudging the ultimate sovereignty of the West Bank, they have effectively foreclosed the possibility of any early progress on that front and may indeed have complicated the prospects for progress elsewhere. The question the summit had initially been intended to resolve--that of who should negotiate with Israel for the return of the West Bank--was rendered academic by the preemptive judgment on who should eventually rule the territory.

Beyond this obvious conclusion, there would appear to be another message, deeper and more central to the overall issue of negotiations, to be gleaned from the summit and its immediate aftermath:

[redacted] the PLO has thus won the role of leader rather than follower in matters involving the core issue in the Middle East peace efforts.

President Sadat conceded this role only reluctantly. Having been forced, however, to recognize his own inability to move the PLO [redacted] he now seems prepared to maintain ranks in an effort to force a similar recognition on the US and Israel. Sadat has long emphasized his belief that a stable peace requires that some account be taken of the Palestinians, but the Palestinians themselves have now made it clear that they will not be satisfied with merely being taken account of. Sadat seems unable and unwilling any longer to challenge the PLO's insistence that it be given binding commitments rather than mere promises.

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Arab summits almost invariably turn into bandwagons, and the bandwagons almost invariably turn to the left. The Rabat summit was no exception. The Arab leaders appear to have gone farther in accommodating the PLO than many of them intended, and they have certainly narrowed their range of options for dealing with Israel and the US. In so doing, they have also raised the likelihood of political stalemate and thus of renewed military action.

This is by no means a certainty, and the Rabat decision does not necessarily mean that interim progress on the Egyptian and Syrian fronts has been ruled out. But it already appears certain that more is going to be demanded sooner of Israel than was the case when Secretary Kissinger last toured the Middle East.

What Lies Behind the Summit Decision...

The summit was a major foreign policy defeat for President Sadat and a major triumph of tactical maneuvering for Yasir Arafat. By going beyond the immediate issue of Jordan versus the PLO as negotiator for the West Bank to the broader and more central question of which party ultimately governs there, the PLO basically turned Sadat's own arguments against him.

During the months of preliminary negotiations on the Jordan-PLO dispute, Sadat had used usually vague promises of long-range satisfaction for the Palestinians' national aims as an inducement to the PLO to acquiesce in a decision that deferred its short-range aspirations and granted a leading role to Jordan in the negotiations. Sadat had wanted to evade the question of sovereignty, concentrating instead at the summit on a formula that would satisfy the PLO without excluding Jordan from a meaningful role, predetermining the fate of the West Bank, or giving Israel an excuse to avoid facing the West Bank issue.

The PLO forced Sadat's hand with a card he had dealt them himself. Neither Sadat nor any other Arab leader, confronted so directly with a choice between accepting or rejecting a definitive statement on the "just aspirations" of the Palestinian people, could be seen to be turning his back on the cause. Whether for purely pragmatic or merely emotional reasons, all Arab leaders proclaim the Palestinian cause as the centerpiece of the Arab struggle with Israel; the PLO challenged them to prove that they mean it.

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The precise roles played by the individual Arab leaders in the summit's deliberations are not yet known. Much of the evidence thus far indicates that the die was cast during the preliminary foreign ministers' conference and that Arafat arrived at the summit relatively assured that he could force through a maximum position against only half-hearted attempts to press the Jordanian case.

Sadat seems to have given in to what he apparently felt was inevitable after Foreign Minister Fahmi had lost the preliminary battle to keep the resolution on the PLO's and the West Bank's status vague. Although Syrian President Asad expressed sympathy for Husayn in his opening remarks at the summit and even argued that there was no justification for imposing a Palestinian national authority on West Bankers, it is clear that the Syrians had already made up their minds to vote against Jordan. In fact, Syrian Foreign Minister Khaddam had worked vigorously on the PLO's behalf at the foreign ministers' sessions [REDACTED]

With the basic decisions thus already essentially made at the foreign ministers' meeting, the summit itself seems to have concentrated on the cosmetics--the effort to bring King Husayn along, the attempt to induce Arafat to patch up or paper over his differences with Husayn, and the further effort--still awaiting resolution at a later mini-summit--to establish specific negotiating roles for Jordan and the PLO. Although a time-consuming process, the first two steps apparently were not difficult to accomplish. Husayn gave in with good grace, in the interests of preserving some standing in the Arab world and of obtaining the increased subsidies [REDACTED] for Arafat, magnanimity in the aftermath of a major victory was not hard to affect.

A decision on the third step, how to allocate negotiating roles, will be anticlimactic. Unless the Arabs decide to allot Jordan a role in the future governance of the West Bank rather than merely in its negotiation--and there is no real reason to believe they will accomplish this--their awaited decision will do no more than put a further gloss of Arab unanimity on a one-sided PLO victory. So long as the Arabs maintain that the fate of the West Bank is a foregone conclusion, the Israelis would be no readier to negotiate a PLO takeover with Jordan than they would with the PLO.

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Few details have been reported of deliberations on military matters, but this was clearly an important agenda item. The allocation of major subsidies to the front-line states, the call for a unified military command, and the apparently military character of the follow-up talks to be held by the front-line leaders all point to an expectation by the Arabs that increased military preparedness is necessary to match the harder line adopted for dealings with Israel. References to economic warfare were muted until the last moment, when King Hassan's soothing summation speech veered sharply into a warning that the Arabs' combined financial might constitutes a potent weapon against Israel and the West.

...And What Lies Ahead

Sadat undoubtedly feels some discomfiture at the resounding failure of his months-long attempt to arrange a resolution of the Jordan-PLO dispute that would at once exhibit Arab firmness on the Palestinian question and yet leave room for flexibility. He is not about to treat this failure as a defeat, however. In fact, his public statements indicate that he hopes to capitalize on the summit's decision in order to demonstrate to the US and, through it, to Israel that the Middle East will never see peace until Israel ultimately accepts the PLO as an entity and a legally constituted neighbor.

Sadat appears to have adopted the Arab position on the PLO with rather more enthusiasm than would be warranted merely by a desire to inform the other Arabs that he is with them. His message seems primarily intended to inform the US and Israel as well that he will not now break ranks. With considerable rhetorical flourish, Sadat has referred to "Palestine" as now ranking among the confrontation "states" and has blatantly reversed his previous position, claiming the summit's decision as his own. With a pointed reminder of what the Arabs can achieve when they are united, he called at a post-summit news conference for a reassessment of the situation by "all sides" in the light of the Arabs' newly forged unity.

President Asad is undoubtedly less disconcerted by the summit's outcome, and in fact the evidence on Foreign Minister Khaddam's deliberations immediately preceding the summit points to a conscious Syrian attempt to ensure that the situation developed as it did. Several Syrian motives for pressing a hard line can be posited:

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-- One possibility is that Asad saw no prospect for early progress on the West Bank under any circumstances and chose to close off that front as an object of concentration for the near term in an effort to force the Israelis to look again to the Golan front. Asad, apparently convinced that the Israelis are not ready to relinquish more territory in the Golan and that the US has not been ready to pressure them on this score, may have concluded that the only way to alter this situation is to force US and Israeli hands by adopting a hard political position that raises questions about Syria's military patience.

-- A second and related line of speculation is that Syria's primary intention in backing the PLO vigorously was to limit Egypt's freedom to negotiate unilaterally with Israel. Syrian suspicions of Sadat's intentions in the negotiations are ingrained, and their first priority at the summit, quite apart from the PLO issue, was to gain Arab support for a motion denying Egypt the right to conclude partial agreements in the Sinai. Although they did not obtain this, the Syrians may have hoped that a defeat for Sadat's PLO-Jordan policy would effectively nip any further expectations Sadat might entertain that he could stray from the fold.

The assumption that Sadat and Asad thus intend, each for his own reasons, to use the summit as a means of direct or indirect pressure on the US nonetheless leaves unanswered the question of where both men expect the negotiations to go next. It seems likely that both leaders recognize that prejudging the sovereignty of the West Bank complicates the negotiations on that front, but we can only speculate on how they will therefore approach the overall negotiating process.

One can argue, for instance, that they feel fortified by the solidarity forged at the summit to press for an all-encompassing settlement in a Geneva context, recognizing that this has been made more difficult but believing that the Arabs are now in a better position to force their will. On the other hand, having now satisfied the PLO, they may feel free to let the West Bank question gestate for a while and turn in the meantime toward interim agreements on their two fronts. The evidence on Sadat's thinking in the wake of the summit is sparse and conflicting; there is no good evidence on Asad's current views.

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Sadat had consistently resisted pressure for a resumption of the Geneva conference until Arab strategy could be unified at the summit. With this now accomplished as far as most of the other Arabs are concerned--undoubtedly at some cost to his image among the Arabs as a successful manipulator--Sadat may feel that his freedom of action on negotiations has been constricted and that he has no choice but to bow to pressures, particularly Syrian, to go for the all or nothing approach. At a post-summit press conference, he skirted a direct question on Geneva but affirmed, in response to a specific query on a further Sinai withdrawal, that "the withdrawal must be on all fronts." The government-controlled Cairo radio, moreover, has called on the Arabs to exert pressure to return the negotiations to Geneva because "there is no longer any problem on the Arab side in the way of convening" the conference.

At the same time, Sadat appears to be attempting to clear the way with the Arabs for a move to keep the negotiations on an interim basis outside Geneva. He stated publicly before the summit--and Foreign Minister Fahmi pursued this line during it--that so long as he remains committed to a final settlement that is inclusive of all Arab demands, Egypt should have the "freedom of movement" to pursue the negotiations by partial stages. The recovery of any part of any Arab territory, his line goes, in the end aids all Arabs. Even as he was affirming after the summit that withdrawals must be accomplished on all fronts, Sadat reiterated the notion of the "freedom of Egyptian action" within the constraints of Arab unity.

On balance, there seems no doubt that Sadat still would like to proceed by stages; for domestic reasons, he needs further evidence of progress for Egypt. The question, however, is whether he can, and the problem is less the strictures imposed by other Arabs, even the now ascendant PLO, than strong objections posed by Syria. Indeed, the position of Syria and Asad's perception of his own prospects for progress on the Golan Heights may well be the key to further movement in the negotiations. The Syrians appear firmly determined to fore-
~~stall unilateral movement by Egypt, chiefly because they now~~
 see little hope for movement of their own. Their anxiety and their objections would probably be diminished, however--as indeed would their pressure for a reconvened Geneva conference--if they were assured that interim negotiations on the Sinai would be accompanied by similar moves on the Golan.

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The greatest near term risk arising from the summit would thus appear to lie in any action by the US and Israel that ignored Syria. While both Egypt and Syria will probably use the summit's decision to press for an early resolution of the Palestinian problem, both seem to remain more interested in their own fronts. In terms of both Arab flexibility and Israeli willingness to move, Sinai remains the most promising single option open, but in the end, movement there without similar movement in Syria could be counterproductive.

Rabat has heightened the possibility of war by limiting both Israeli and Arab negotiating options and thus increasing the chances that a deteriorating stalemate will result. Having in a sense created their own logjam, the Arabs might ultimately decide that the only way to break it is to reopen hostilities. At the same time, there is no evidence that the Arabs believe the military option any better serves their interests now than it did before the summit. They probably believe that the pressure is now more heavily on the US and Israel to move; the time span of their patience may therefore be shorter. But it does not yet seem to have run out.

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